

HAUTE COUTURE

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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RICHARD MARTIN & HAROLD KODA

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JACKET/COVER: Jacques Fath. *Ball gown*, ca. 1951 (detail). Black silk velvet with ivory silk satin, white mink, and gold metal trim. Gift of Mrs. Giorgio Uzielli, 1984 (1984.606.3a,b). See page 85
FRONTISPIECE: Elsa Schiaparelli. Evening jacket, spring 1939 (detail)
Black silk velvet embroidered with gold metal-wrapped thread and mirrors.
Gift of Mrs. Pauline Potter, 1950 (CI 50.34.2)

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CONTENTS

SPONSOR'S STATEMENT

CHANEL and I are honored to contribute to the support of "Haute Couture," the new exhibition at The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Coco Chanel in her time did a lot for the arts and even more for the artists.

This "Haute Couture" exhibition, with its treasures of workmanship, design, and grace, will bring to the public the vision of an art that must never be forgotten while constantly evolving as a witness of its period in time.

I am pleased that our support will allow The Costume Institute to present an exciting new perspective on the timeless world of couture.

KARL LAGERFELD

SPONSOR'S STATEMENT

I am extremely pleased to have the opportunity to support an event as momentous as the "Haute Couture" exhibition at The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. As with other artistic conceptions, a designer's couture collection allows rare insight into a vision of ideal form and expression. Although it may evoke a sense of timelessness, its essence is a reflection of the mood of its particular time and culture.

This exhibition, with the vast resources of The Costume Institute to enrich it, is so important because it will provide the rare occasion to study the fascinating metamorphosis of couture, from its origins to the current movement toward a new simplicity of shape and modernism of fabric and technology. As in the past, today's couture is evolving in recognition of its time. As we approach the millennium, I passionately believe that the innovations of couture will continue to set the modern standards of clothing design. As such, I offer praise and applause to the Metropolitan Museum for its vision in presenting a study in haute couture.

GIANNI VERSACE



Detail of Chanel evening gown (see page 96)

FOREWORD

Haute couture, fashion's art of supreme technical mastery and virtuoso execution, is handsomely and perhaps peerlessly represented in the collection of The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This book and the exhibition it accompanies present the historical landmarks of couture and also the persistent discrimination and authority of high aesthetic quality that characterize it.

One of a suite of exhibitions examining the Museum's collections, it brings the same principles of connoisseurship and careful visual examination and judgment to the art objects of fashion that are used to address other visual arts, although in this area we are not bound to discern the authentic and reject the lesser. Without question, the fine arts have a correspondence in haute couture, the specific art of fashion that begins in the same generation as modern art. As we examine these couture garments in this exhibition and in these pages, we enjoy the discriminating details that disclose the privileges of craft and visual acumen. We can look at feathers partially stripped and sewn together to achieve an effect unmatched in nature, and at sequining that displays the multiple treatments of metal, bead, or stone transfigured to a shimmering surface. We can see mundane materials maneuvered with the proficient and perfecting skills of haute couture to become unequivocally beautiful garments. And we can appreciate with the connoisseur's gratification the illusions of trompe l'oeil and the secret satisfactions of hand-sewn detail unmatched in conventional dress.

The exhibition is made possible by financial support from Chanel and Gianni Versace, and to them we give most appreciative thanks for their generosity.

That the costumes chosen to illustrate the finest moments and outstanding examples of haute couture are almost all from the collection of The Costume Institute is due to the donors who have bestowed on us gifts of the most important and most impressive clothing ever made. We are grateful to them, as we are also to the lenders to the present exhibition. This selection magnificently illustrates fashion's highest ambitions and our belief in costume as a compelling constituent of visual culture.

PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO

Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



INTRODUCTION

In a story, perhaps apocryphal, Diana Vreeland commanded an assistant going to Paris just after World War II to bring her back an artificial rose made for the adornment of the haute couture. By the quality of such a token would Vreeland know that artisanry and commitment remained in the creations of Paris. Satisfied with her 1940s rose, Vreeland knew that the couture was renascent after the war.

For more than a century, the couture has been emblem of the triumph of costume and fashion. It represents the fusion of fashion—the modern entity composed of novelty and synergy with personal and social needs—and costume—the consummate arts of dressmaking, tailoring, and constituent crafts to apparel and accessories. Founded in the crucible of modernism's invention in the middle years of the nineteenth century in Paris, with the expanded patronage cultivated by the House of Worth, but still dependent upon the considerable support of Empress Eugénie, the couture has long stood as the modern equilibrium between the garment as exquisite aggregate and the burgeoning notions of fashion as a system.

This exhibition is created around the collection of The Costume Institute, rich in the germinal and indicative pieces of the haute couture. Perhaps nowhere else in the world is there assembled a collection so fully demonstrative of the haute couture. Thus we have chosen to show the couture in two principal aspects. The outline of the history of modern dress can be presented in the extraordinary examples of the haute couture offered here. And one can see the constituent skills both in the couture house for dressmaking and for tailoring and in adjunct workshops for related skills and ornament.

The legend of Vreeland's rose also suggests the heartfelt faith in the couture. The dove returning with an olive branch to Noah's ark could hardly have been more welcome. The persistence of the haute couture is as roundly questioned and doubted and debated as the survival of painting or the supposed death of Broadway. These conventions that stand for more than their arts themselves have become signs for art's survival. Some may have doubted that the couture would survive its founder, the entrepreneurial Charles Frederick Worth, and the periodic upheavals of the 1870s and 1880s. In the early years of the twentieth century, Paul

Detail of Vionnet day dress (see page 51)

Poiret took couture into an admittedly dangerous path of change, responding to Orientalist and social sirens, but even more to the beckoning of commerce and the use of the couture as a generating engine for fashion and fragrance broadly disseminated. Initially, Poiret's self-conscious avant-gardism was attacked by the House of Worth as not meriting the haute couture tradition that Worth embodied, but a progressive novelty-driven century was perhaps inexorable. As the couture of the 1930s expanded, those who could actually make garments chose to disparage those who could only sketch or otherwise envision them, setting off a classic battle of conceptual art versus technical proficiency that is also a sign of the century in myriad arts.

Even Vreeland's rose is a couture story couched in the circumstances of the other visual arts. After all, the school of Paris vis-à-vis the fine arts had more or less decamped during the war; one would not have found the same reassurance, other than the already venerable figures of Picasso, Braque, and Matisse, in the world of painting and sculpture. Vreeland's test of the rose is, of course, a synecdoche, but one that makes good sense in a field in which the endeavor of the haute couture is to make the consummate garment, engaging the many perfect crafts that constitute dress. If the skills of the rose were not renewed, there could be no beautiful dress. Matisse, nearly blind and functioning with scissors and colored papers, could create a masterpiece in the artist's sublime autonomy. The couture's version thereof required not only the designer's leadership and will, but the capability of an echelon of *petites mains* proficiencies that stood behind the designer.

Ironically, the couture flourished in the postwar period, beginning with the immense popular appeal of Christian Dior's "New Look" in 1947. Given its name not by Dior, but by the American editor and journalist Carmel Snow, who enthused of the 1947 collection that Dior had given "a new look," this supposed fashion novelty was so successful in part because it knew acutely its history and reconvened the finest skills to the couture. In the economically puissant years of the late 1940s and 1950s, the rebirth of the couture, supported by many American clients and thus well represented in The Costume Institute, was a significant connection between the world of the American century and the couture tradition. To the surprise of those who might have expected the couture to fail in these critical years, it flourished. Even in the 1960s, as the sea changes of the postindustrial society swept the globe and pushed a tide of social exchange, the couture remained in place as a guiding light of fashion. It secured firmly the possibilities established long before by Paul Poiret, Gabrielle Chanel, and Jean Patou of allowing the resonances of couture design to provide an economic structure for the practices of the couture. The supposed détente of the couture in the turbulent years of the late 1960s and 1970s has proved not to be the demise of the artform, but its perdurable system, annexing popular visual culture and exploiting popular successes.

Some have been tempted in the 1990s to forecast the decline and demise of the couture once again. The prophecy is, by historical judgment, improbable. In an epoch of straitened economic circumstances and shaken belief in clothing consumption, all fashion is scrutinized. But the couture's offering of distinction in design and technique remains a compelling force, one even more potent when much other quality has atrophied. Like all the visual arts, the haute couture has evolved in the past hundred years, but it seems no more headed to extinction than the medium that Mondrian made absolute or the forms that Brancusi distilled. On the contrary, the haute couture is headed unabashedly by its own aspirations toward distinction, and in that we have a torch in dim times. That, particularly in 1995, there has been a keen interest in observing the haute couture is testimony to the couture as a force of inspiration. Globally, the excitement about the rediscovery of impeccable tailoring and the possibilities of tastefully splendid clothing in garish times is inevitably led once again by the haute couture, not intending to be sovereign or dictatorial, as it once was, in directing all fashion standards, but in setting an example by which our visual culture would be galvanized and rendered accountable to quality commensurate with our culture at its best.

Today, the haute couture is neither haughty nor superannuated. It is an aesthetic essay in which cherished and extraordinary skills continue to be practiced in service of a late modern age. It remains a discipline of ultimate imagination, unaccountable to cost, with the paradox of being the fashion most cognizant of its ideal clients. It is, as it began, a dream of quality in an era of industry and its succession. The haute couture persists in providing us with a paragon of the most beautiful clothing that can be envisioned and made in any time.



HISTORY

The history of the haute couture begins with two extraordinary circumstances. Its founder is Charles Frederick Worth, an Englishman, though its city of destiny always is Paris. The haute couture was founded in the same epoch in which the sewing machine was invented. In the face of a growing technology, an art of hand-sewn techniques arose in order to establish a distinction affiliated with an old order. What had been the particular skills of dressmaking and tailoring in the service of individual clients, and in a few instances to some partially assembled or ready-to-wear garments, became an independent enterprise, one that answered to clients but took its initiative from the concepts of the fashion designer, now no artisan to the state or patron, but a viably independent creator.

Further, that the haute couture arose in the same place and time as modern art in the context of Manet and Baudelaire cannot be mere coincidence. The spectatorship and new public that mandated a transfigured art also required a new fashion intended not for court minglings, but for the visible exchanges of boulevards, opera houses, even cafés. The history of the haute couture is, from inception, closely aligned to the history of modern art. The expressive opulence of nineteenth-century dress, familiar in paintings of the period by such fashion-acute observers as Manet, Degas, and Seurat, rendered the visual spectacle that captivated the modern movement in its interest in urban life and the emotional life of individuals. The shapes that evolved from Worth's original crinoline bubbles were perhaps always structures seeking the effortless lightness of modernity that Worth had seized so instinctively in the 1850s and 1860s.

Like Cubism's and Futurism's assertive fracturing of the world, the haute couture was dramatically challenged and changed in the first decades of the twentieth century. Like every other phenomenon of the century, the haute couture bifurcated into conservative and avant-garde strands in the beginning of the century, only to be reunited in the 1970s. This schism, deliberately precipitated by Paul Poiret after he was dismissed by the House of Worth, has forced as many misreadings of fashion as it has in other visual arts. It is hard to describe Callot Soeurs as either conservative or radical, so thoroughly combined and compatible are the traits of each pole. Likewise, it would be hard to think of Jeanne Lanvin without her edgy, ambitious, advanced

Detail of Callot Soeurs evening gown (see page 22)

aspect, but it is equally true that she practiced a certain etiquette, just as Duchamp's radicalism was accompanied by a dandy and intellectual manner not always associated with aesthetic insurrection. Poiret's prideful invention of novel shapes, depending on the Orientalist conventions of wrapping the body more or less as a pliable cylinder, took the same aggressive position of Cubism's reconstitution of the visual world into a primacy of shapes already sapiently observed by the previous generations of artists. Poiret appended to the haute couture a possibility of extreme novelty and avant-garde positioning, whether in the surprise of a mannequin parade as prototype to the fashion runway show or the reshaping of attire with the boast that he had eliminated the long tyranny of the corset. But an art that speculates in the visual world and that casts itself into the roles of seeing and being seen in that world never forsakes its conserving, socializing options even as the possibility emerges for advanced forms and conceptual ambition.

Thus, the abiding equivocation of twentieth-century couture between convention and change conforms to the positions of art in the same time. Explorations and innovations by Madeleine Vionnet, Jeanne Lanvin, Gabrielle Chanel, and others are sponsored by the artist's objectives and needs, whether arising from dressmaking and tailoring or from the social needs of dress. No designer has been wholly conceptual or wholly artisanal. When formal principles held primacy, the social congress effected through clothing was never completely absent. Chanel's delight in the process and practices of the haute couture may have been secondary to her compelling picture of society, but both principles were effective in her clothing. Similarly, Alix Grès exemplified the sculptor absorbed in technique but was inevitably in the thrall of 1920s and 1930s neoclassicism and the contemporary imagery of powerful women. Elsa Schiaparelli's Surrealism may be an expropriated art, whereas Vionnet's art is fathomed within the garment structure, yet each discovers her individual art of dress.

In the dialectic between Christain Dior and Cristobal Balenciaga in the postwar years, there is a similar disparity in sensibility, despite each designer's profound sense of the couture as an art. One designer's courtly sense of the feminine sublime and the other's robust sensibility for a new swagger and self-confidence guaranteed work that was distinctive but curiously complementary. As art would willingly move from the empyrean of abstraction to the commercial cacophony in the 1960s, so fashion directed itself increasingly to the powerful energy of popular culture. But popular culture and art only proved to fuel the excitement of the haute couture, with the ingenuity of such designers as Pierre Cardin and Yves Saint Laurent appropriating the most contemporary and even seemingly disestablishment gestures into the couture.



Pierre-Louis Pierson

Countess Castiglione, 1860s
Albumen silver print from glass negative
David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 1975 (1975.548.116)

The birth of the couture was attended by infants photography and modern art. Virginia Oldoini, Countess Verasis de Castiglione, was a voracious client of the couture and photography, acquiring fashion from the new *maisons de couture* of Worth and Pingat. For the new court-affiliated women of power, as well as the soaring bourgeoisie, the three arts provided a new world of spectatorship and self-satisfaction. The altered image further suggests the client's intervention.



CHARLES FREDERICK WORTH

Ball gown, ca. 1887 (left)
Pale green and ivory silk satin, and yellow, pink, and ivory silk chiffon with embroidered sunburst pattern
Gift of Orme Wilson and R. Thornton Wilson, in memory of their mother, Mrs. Caroline Schermerhorn Astor Wilson, 1949 (49.3.28a,b)

Ball gown, ca. 1892 (right)
Pink silk damask with crystal embroidery
Gift of Orme Wilson and R. Thornton Wilson, in memory of their mother, Mrs. Caroline Schermerhorn Astor Wilson, 1949 (49.3.25a,b)

In instances of the elaborate patterns *à la disposition*, woven to ultimate configuration as a dress, the House of Worth created with great invention. Moreover, the textile is so rich and dense that the couturier has allowed the selvage, as thick as grosgrain ribbon, to be its own finish, embellished with bullion and embroidery (see detail). In this decision, the couture garment expresses a startling truth to its process yet without mitigating its sumptuous effect.



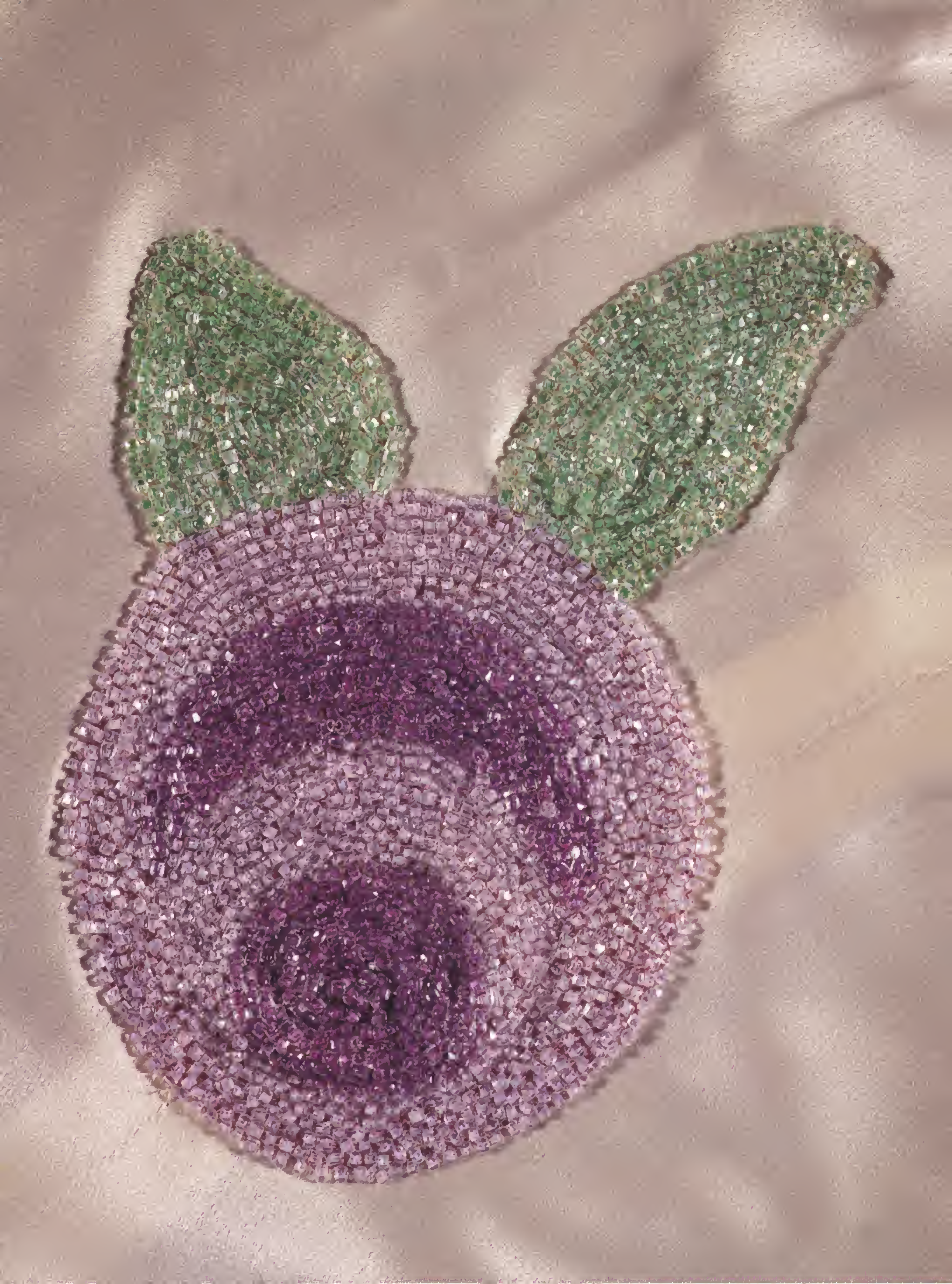


Georges Lepape, *Laquelle?*, plate 5 in *Gazette du Bon Ton*, September 1913. Courtesy Hope B. McCormick Costume Center, Chicago Historical Society, Gift of the Costume Committee

Paul Poiret

"Sorbet" gown, 1913
Ivory and black silk satin with seed-beaded appliqués
Courtesy Hope B. McCormick Costume Center, Chicago Historical Society, Gift of the Costume Committee

In the braggadocio of claiming to liberate women from the corset, Poiret factually overstated his role but realized the importance of his modernization of the clothing ethos. Influenced by the Orientalism of the 1910s, Poiret took unstructured lengths of fabrics and wrapped them around the body in flagrant opposition to Edwardian structure and tailored formation. This detail is a signature Poiret rose; its finesse is apparent in the caviar-size seed beads applied to backing and appliquéd to the dress.





Callot Soeurs

Evening gown, 1910–14
Beige cotton net embroidered with gold, silver, pink, and copper sequins and beads
The Jacqueline Loewe Fowler Costume Collection, Gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler, 1981 (1981.380.2)

Attuned to the Orientalism of the decade, the Callot Soeurs reined the silhouette to a cylindrical wrap, effortless in lingerie-weight fabric. Yet for its innovations, the work of the Callot Soeurs does not stint the couture's roster of technical skills. Here, sequins vary: some are punched into a filigree pinwheel, others are hammered flat; in some instances metal is overlaid onto faceted crystal (see detail on page 14). But even this ornamentation is not entirely for the pleasure of heterogeneity, but for the calculated and magical effects of such varied surfaces seen in evening and candle lights.



JEANNE LANVIN

Robe de style, 1924–25 (left)
Ivory and black silk taffeta trimmed with pink and black silk velvet rosettes
Gift of Mrs. W. R. Grace, 1956 (CI 56.49.1)

Robe de style, 1924–25 (right)
Ivory and black silk taffeta trimmed with pink and black silk velvet rosettes
Gift of Mrs. William B. Given Jr., 1979 (1979.122.1)

High art, and haute couture with it, has often been erroneously associated with the sovereign disposition. But haute couture has also been conditioned on the relationship between couture ideas and the will of the client. A client seeking a demure profile might ask for one décolletage treatment, while another might demand an alternative. A designer would allow variation only in modules, but a couture garment often becomes a synergy of client and couturier.



Edward Molyneux

Evening dress, 1926–27
Cream silk georgette embroidered with iridescent paillettes
Gift of Mrs. Adam Gimbel, 1942
(CI 42.33.3)

The flapper dresses of the 1920s coexisted in couture and ready-to-wear, the latter often gaudy, the former continuing the linear interests of high-style dress of the 1910s. Molyneux was a modernist designer of consummate good taste, walking a fine line between the refinements of couture style and a modernist aesthetic and the ambition to be socially and culturally advanced in the age of Anita Loos and Gatsby. Sequins in vertical stripes are overlaid with loose lengths of georgette picoted along the edges for a delicate shimmer on vertical filaments.





Gabrielle Chanel

Day ensemble, 1926
Black wool jersey and silk satin
Purchase, Gift of New-York Historical Society,
by exchange, 1984 (1984.28a–c)

The "little black dress," archetype of clothing's penchant for social reversal and political change, assumes the hitherto plebeian material of jersey as a plausible field for genteel finishing. In all of its layered details, a simple material becomes elegant through superior technique: the binding, pleating, and hemming of the skirt, and the hand-sewn belt epitomize the poverty de luxe, a luxury most keenly felt amid penury.

Chanel's similar appropriations from riding habits and menswear demonstrate the same penchant to find utility and to refine the practical motif through exemplary execution. As she borrowed such apparel aspects, she inevitably brought the aura of the original association—even the service uniform—as a frisson to the new use.







Madeleine Vionnet

Evening gown, 1936–37
Black silk satin with faux ivory belt buckle
Gift of Madame Madeleine Vionnet, 1952 (CI 52.18.2)

Vionnet exposed her composition with characteristic subtlety. The wide cylinder of bias cut is pulled in at center front, radiating from and anchored by the buckle (see detail). To the casual observer, the effect is superficial and the buckle may seem applied decoration. Strategically placed at the nexus of bias construction, the center front is the dynamic convergence of the dress as a composition. In such a gesture, Vionnet was a dauntless modernist.





Elsa Schiaparelli

Suit, 1938
Navy blue wool
Gift of Mrs. J. R. Keagy, 1974
(1974.338.1a,b)

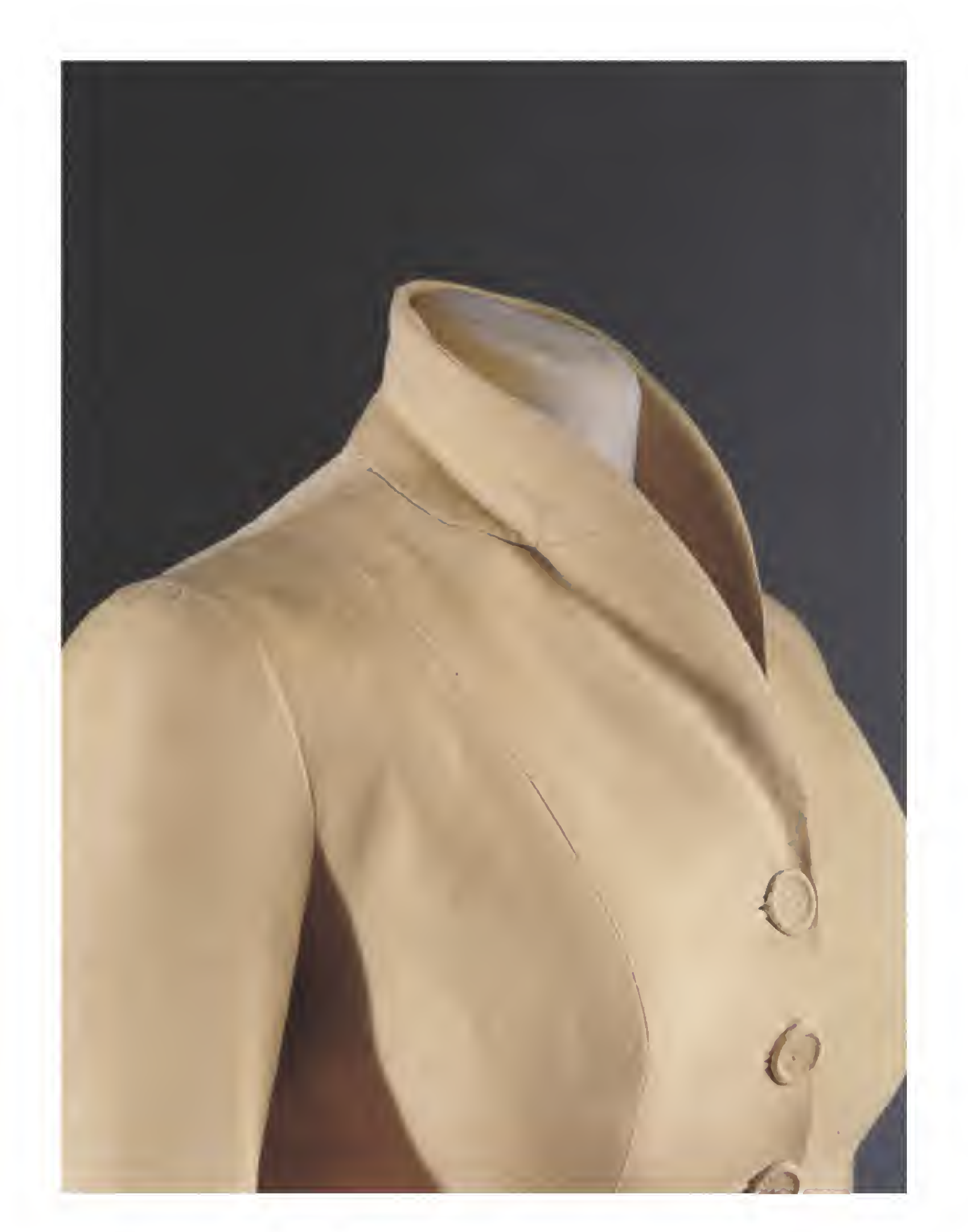
While Schiaparelli was herself not a tailor and was scorned by arch-rival Chanel for her lack of skills, she presided over one of the great tailoring ateliers responsible for the definitive broad-shouldered and formfitting suits and jackets of the 1930s. The designer's conceptual embellishments were based on this tailoring foundation. In some instances, the tailors spoke for themselves, as in this example, a suit with breast pockets incorporated into the dimension of the bust.

Jean Patou

Suit, ca. 1937
Black wool gabardine with silk grosgrain inserts
Gift of Mrs. Stephen M. Kellen, 1978 (1978.165.20a,b)

Patou constructed a tailored suit as if it were a jigsaw puzzle. Formed as a gabardine suit with all the pattern pieces wholly constructed, the silk grosgrain diamonds were inserted, replacing gabardine squares. Each diamond is composed of four mitered elements. By this analytical technique, the suit is integrally conceived, and the front of the suit reveals the wool ground as a full surround.





Christian Dior

"Bar" suit, spring 1947
Beige silk jacket with black
wool skirt
Jacket: Gift of Mrs. John Chambers
Hughes, 1958 (CI 58.34.30)
Skirt: Gift of Christian Dior, 1969
(CI 69.40)

The triumph of Dior's "New Look" was to restore Paris after World War II as the sovereign city of fashion. Reportedly, Diana Vreeland, then of *Harper's Bazaar,* asked a young colleague visiting in Paris just after the war to bring back a silk rose of the couture. Seeing the beauty of that rose, Vreeland acknowledged that Paris was revenant. Thus, not only the aura of glamour was restored, but also the artisanry that might be appreciated by a connoisseur of fine clothing. Symbol of the new, the Dior "Bar" suit also reveals the hand stitching at the inside of the collar and hand-stitched self-covered buttons of the atelier *tailleur.*





Cristobal Balenciaga

Day dress, 1955–56
Dark brown wool jersey
Gift of Mrs. William Rand, 1964
(CI 64.4.3)

In the 1950s, as the couture made fashion news and mandates, Balenciaga achieved leadership status in mid-decade with the chemise. While still structured, but floating over the body, the fluid effect of the chemise became in Balenciaga's exaggeration the sack dress, forsaking the waist and anticipating the 1960s shift.

In conceiving the chemise, Balenciaga applied lessons of suppleness he had long employed in his collars. Inspired by the kimono collar, he created a distinctive bias roll collar pushed back from the neck. In integrating this collar with the chemise silhouette, he pitched the amplitude front and back, allowing the yielding, floating form of the collar to complement the softness of the dress.

Yves Saint Laurent

"Mondrian" day dress, fall 1965
Red, blue, white, yellow, and black wool jersey
Gift of Mrs. William Rand, 1969
(CI 69.23)

As the sack dress evolved in the 1960s into a modified form, the shift, Saint Laurent realized that the dress's planarity was an ideal field for color blocks. Knowing the flat planes of the 1960s canvases achieved by contemporary artists in the lineage of Mondrian, Saint Laurent made the historical case for the artistic sensibility of his time. Yet he also demonstrated a feat of dressmaking, setting in each block of jersey, piecing in order to create the semblance of the Mondrian order and to accommodate the body imperceptibly by hiding all the shaping in the grid of seams.



André Courrèges

Day ensemble, 1965 (left)
White and red wool and nylon knit
Gift of Kimberly Knitwear Inc., 1974 (1974.136.9a,b)

Day dress, 1965 (right)
White wool twill with black silk grosgrain trim
Gift of Kimberly Knitwear Inc., 1974 (1974.136.3)

Developing from his training and sensibility achieved at Balenciaga, Courrèges applied the surgical cut and strict tailoring to the geometric planes of 1960s fabric. The thrown-back rolled collar derives from Balenciaga, as does a responsiveness to comfort. While attuned to fashion of the very young as inspired by Mary Quant and Pierre Cardin, Courrèges retained Balenciaga's flattering attention to the details that obscure age.



André Courrèges

Evening dress, 1965
White cotton and green silk satin completely embroidered with iridescent sequins
Gift of Jane Holzer, 1974
(1974.384.10)

The paradox of the couture of the 1960s was its Utopian dream, tempered by the Space Age, and its thorough reliance on traditional techniques. Thus, Courrèges evokes with sequins a futuristic suit of mail disposed between medieval history and speculation on clothing for the future. When ready-to-wear fashion imitated the effects of such couture, suppleness was often sacrificed, as was the Utopian vision of a clothing at once opulent and optimistic.



Emanuel Ungaro

Ensemble, 1969
White elasticized net with allover appliqués of white braid trefoils
Gift of Mrs. Leonard Holzer, 1970
(1970.89.1a–c)

As fashion's last absolute decree entered its concluding phase, skirts became shorter and shorter until they atrophied into short shorts, or, in the phrase of the day, hot pants. In a couture playsuit with matching leggings, the elastic fabric has been hand-appliquéd with white braid. In the youth-impassioned tumult of the time, there was equivocation between Warhol superstar and couture client. As self-consciously insurrectionist as the political gesture is, the craft of the garment is, like Chanel's "little black dress," traditional.



Yves Saint Laurent

Pantsuit, 1970 (left)
Brown wool gabardine
Gift of Mireille Levy, 1984
(1984.163.4a,b)

Christian Dior
by Marc Bohan

Suit, 1970 (right)

Brown and white wool tweed
Gift of Mireille Levy, 1991
(1991.34.1a–c)

Almost immediately, the response to very short length in the late 1960s was the militant dropping of the length to below the knee, grazing the upper calf, and the effective avoidance of all skirt-length determinations in pantsuits. The long-length maxi proved, in its lack of success, to be a trauma to the couture, becoming a challenge to the supposed ultimate authority of fashion. The maxi was the last fashion rule; pantsuits—and cognate menswear borrowings—survived to constitute the revolution and resolution of late-1960s fashion.





Yves Saint Laurent

Evening ensemble,
fall/winter 1976–77 (left)
Red silk chiffon with gold stripes, green silk faille, red silk taffeta
Gift of Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1979 (1979.329.6a–d)

Evening ensemble,
fall/winter 1976–77 (right)
Red silk crepe, red silk faille, green silk taffeta
Gift of Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1979 (1979.329.7a–c)

Fashion design in the early 1970s was dominated by ready-to-wear and sportswear, both because of new standards of casual behavior and because of the expanded interest of the bourgeoisie in fashion. In this climate, in which some mistook the couture's renewed synergy with popular fashion design as its demise, Saint Laurent created a reactionary collection intended to revive the couture, using the most luxurious fabrics, feathered turbans, passementerie ties, and horsehair-braid–reinforced petticoats. Saint Laurent refreshed the couture, making it seem desirable and distinctive in a time of ready-to-wear leadership. Acclaimed by the *International Herald Tribune* as "a revolution" and "the most dramatic and expensive show ever seen in Paris," Saint Laurent's Russian collection of fall/winter 1976–77 was counterrevolutionary to the 1960s.





Chanel by Karl Lagerfeld

Trompe l'oeil evening gown, 1983
Black silk with multicolored beads and gilt embroidery
Courtesy Chanel

In his first collection for the house of Chanel, Lagerfeld demonstrated his respect for the tradition of the designer and his special capacity to bring new animation to the design. Playing on Chanel's favored look and her mingling of real and costume jewelry, Lagerfeld created a tour de force of jewelry impression, integrating the embroidered likeness of jewelry into the dress.





Patou
by Christian Lacroix

One-shouldered evening gown,
spring/summer 1987
Raspberry silk taffeta
Gift of Comtesse Thierry de Ganay, 1994 (1994.278)

While lastingly known for his eighteenth-century–inspired pouf dress, Lacroix made the most inflated version of the dress only when he was the designer for Patou. There and at his own house, Lacroix combines luxury and insouciance, enamored as he is of all the artisanal trades, fringe, bead, embroidery, etcetera. The opulence of Lacroix is attained by his strong sense of vibrant color and pattern mix exacerbated by his willingness to call in all the opportunities of couture technique.



Gianni Versace

Evening gown, 1995
Nacreous polyvinyl chloride and clear vinyl
Courtesy Versace

Like the Chanel "little black dress," in which mundane materials are transformed by couture handwork, the Versace gown finesses industrial-weight vinyl into a crystalline overskirt evocative of nineteenth-century silhouette, but realized as a Crystal Palace of twentieth-century material. To manipulate the cumbersome vinyl with the handwork of the couture is a self-imposed challenge to merge new technology and old technique.



ATELIER

The couture house is customarily composed of two parts, one devoted to dressmaking *(flou)*, the other devoted to tailoring *(tailleur)* of suits and coats. The designer is often aided by a *modéliste*, a second in command of design, who works with both ateliers and in particular with fabric suppliers. Skilled workers in each area practice the arts apposite to the area. Embellishment and accessories are added incrementally as applied decoration, often from sources outside the couture house. However, with regard to the unembellished garment, the modern couture house is a completely autonomous workroom of dedicated ateliers. In fact, surprisingly, in view of the elegant locations of most couture houses, the creation of the garments occurs in the *maisons particulières* of the house, thus under the daily surveillance of the designer as well as in intimate connection with the *vendeuses* and other managing personnel. Depending upon the designer, the design process might begin either with sketches or with a muslin or toile, draped and cut.

The skills of the couture that are in the house are essential to its creation. Each part of the atelier has a *première d'atelier* who works to translate the sketch or toile to a finished design. Traditionally, each atelier had a rigorous hierarchy of first hands, second hands, and apprentices. Only the first hands have conventionally been allowed to work on a new design. Fit, both in its tailored form and in its dressmaking variant, is inevitably part of the value of the couture. A designer or her or his trusted fitter will conduct the client through a series of fittings to determine the minute adjustments of the garment to the individual's size and sense of comfort. A client is led carefully through the process by a *vendeuse* who is a highly knowledgeable salesperson.

Haute couture depends upon the projection of a garment that is ideal to the creator's vision and that can be rendered to the specific demands and shape of the client. Charles Frederick Worth established the tradition that set his enterprise apart from dressmaking: he showed collections semiannually, allowing the garments to stand as his aesthetic statement and permitting the client to select from among the designs available. Thus, as one can see in the pages that follow, designers have allowed for the smallest modifications in dressmaking or the calipering of tailoring to

Detail of Jean-Philippe Worth wedding dress (see page 49)

adjust a perfect shape to the needs of a human body. Madeleine Vionnet's or Alix Grès's subtlety in dressmaking incorporated into the perfect design the possible adjustments that make the dress suitable to the client. The couture is like architecture, dependent on the synergy between client and architect for realization of a project but always cognizant of landscape and existing physical properties. Similarly, the couture garment is a fulfillment of mutually agreeing ideas that are contingent upon and wrought on the human body.

The essence of tailoring is the simulation of line on the three-dimensional body, while the substance of dressmaking is finding sculptural form in the soft materials of apparel. Tailoring is planar, working with a relatively firm fabric. Dressmaking pertains to the articulation of form from the manipulation of more pliant cloth. Tailoring proceeds from cutting the segments that constitute pattern, whereas dressmaking achieves its effect through draping. While the goals of these techniques are not mutually exclusive, they render two distinct forms of clothing, each capable of meeting the designer's ideal and each capable of perfect calibration to the client.



Jean-Philippe Worth

Wedding gown, 1896
Cream silk damask
Gift of Miss Agnes Miles Carpenter, 1941 (CI 41.14.1)

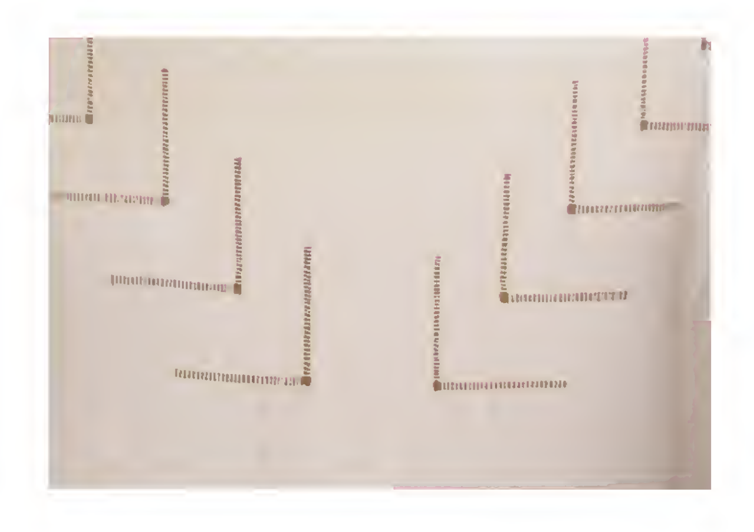
Employing a textile design that mirrors itself from selvage to selvage, Worth created a dress pieced into a perfectly symmetrical image at the center. The absorption of image to hourglass silhouette further demonstrates Worth's mastery, as the ultimate dressmaking is constituted in the smooth, custom-made fit of this gown. Tiny hand-stitched cartridge pleats at the shoulder create huge leg-of-mutton sleeves that offset the fit, which cleaves to the period's ideal silhouette of narrow waist and bell-shaped fullness of the skirt.

Madeleine Vionnet

Bias-cut day dress, 1920 (left)
Ecru silk crepe
Gift of Judith Backer Grunberg, 1993 (1993.228)

Bias-cut day dress, ca. 1932 (right)
Ivory silk crepe
Gift of Mrs. T. Reed Vreeland, 1961 (CI 61.3.2)

Even as early as 1920, Vionnet was working with fabric on a diagonal grain so it created a supple skimming over the body. Earlier silks conformed to the armature of the fashionable silhouette, but Vionnet elected to use high-twist crepe on the bias, exploiting the fabric's elasticity to express a softness of silhouette and to suggest the uncorseted body effects that the designer inaugurated. Vionnet found ingenious ways to conceal the critical shaping of a dress—fusing front and back and articulating principles of the body without explicit structure—within what seemed to be only minor devices of decoration. In the dress on the right, chevron faggoting in fine-thread drawnwork creates arrowheads that reiterate the direction of the grain.





Madeleine Vionnet

Day dress, 1926–27
Maroon silk crepe
Gift of Mrs. Aline Bernstein, 1945
(CI 45.103.2)

The unexpected challenge of couture design in the late 1910s and 1920s was to create forms out of soft fabric without reliance on any underlying structure. It is as if sculpture had been reconstituted from an art of base and mass to an art with legerdemain and supple balances, as it would become over decades. But Vionnet mastered first and most successfully the possibilities of minimal structures imposed on soft fabric to set up a delicate fulcrum of volume and balance. A day dress achieves stability in the dynamic of silk crepe rendered as a lattice, just enough structure in tiny pin tucks to set off differing tensions to the bias (see detail on page 10). Below the lattice, Vionnet created a waist seam to which she attached the finely box-pleated skirt.



Madeleine Vionnet

Cocktail dress, 1936
Black silk organza tucked in a honeycomb pattern
Gift of Mrs. John Chambers Hughes, 1958 (CI 58.34.15)

Vionnet offered an ultimate performance in lithe equilibrium with a bodice constructed of one piece, seamed at the waist (see detail). All shaping is created by the graduated hexagons. Thus, Vionnet imposed all form through the illusion of embellishment but carefully concealed a system of minuscule adjustments into the design of the tucking. This sublimated essential structure is akin to modern architecture's streamlined vocabulary of ornament to serve compositional needs.









Jeanne Lanvin

Evening dress, ca. 1930
Light green silk taffeta and silk net
Gift of Mrs. Jill L. Leinbach and James L. Long, in memory of their mother, Mrs. Jane P. Long, 1986 (1986.377.1a–c)

A silk tulle skirt is obscured by bias ruffles, bringing the relatively flat bias construction of Vionnet to a more three-dimensional application. Other bias bands crisscross at the neckline, joined imperceptibly to the body of the dress by a narrow web of tulle.



Alix Grès

Dinner dress, ca. 1939 (left)
Pink silk jersey
Gift of Mrs. John A. van Beuren and Mrs. Samuel M. V. Hamilton, 1977 (1977.210.21)

Lucien Lelong

Dinner dress, spring 1940 (right)
Pale turquoise silk jersey with gold embroidered belt
Gift of Bettina Ballard, 1958 (CI 58.7.7a,b)

By the 1930s, use of bias had become a convention of evening wear. Alix used a fine-gauge silk jersey to achieve liquid bias-like effects, often with reference to the "wet" drapery of classical sculpture. Alix's implied classicism accorded to the period's interest in Greek and Roman examples for theater, poetry, and the visual arts. While Alix designed in circumstances suggesting the isolation of an artist's studio, Lelong surrounded himself with assistants of individual talent. He served as springboard for many young designers: the 1940 dress is said to be by Dior.

Mainbocher

Wedding dress of the Duchess of Windsor, 1937
Dove gray (originally blue) silk crepe
Gift of the Duchess of Windsor, 1950 (CI 50.110a–d)

Mainbocher was known for his sense of decorum, creating a garment impeccable to and proper for the occasion. If there was a reticence to his design, as opposed to the modern experiments of others in the 1930s, it was because he sought an unerring gentility. Decoration was held to a minimum, and Mainbocher favored refined feminine forms (petal-shaped collar, shirring, small embroideries; see detail on page 116). Even the gloves were specifically designed to accommodate the wedding ring. While, due to a defect in the stability of the dye, the dress has uniformly lost its "Windsor blue," it retains the willful seemliness of a marriage in world view.



Jacques Griffe

Cocktail dress, spring 1951
Gunmetal silk organza
Gift of Mrs. Byron C. Foy, 1953
(CI 53.40.14a–f)

Griffe, who had worked with Vionnet, permitted the graduated structural elements to become ornament. Far more grandiloquent than Vionnet and, in the manner of the 1950s, returning to crinoline-like shaping and picturesque resplendence in fashion, Griffe created a full skirt with welt tucks that encase bands of horsehair. One feature of this period is that the horsehair progresses very subtly from narrow to wider, demonstrating the sophisticated resources of the couture. Arguably, every skill of the couture flourished in the 1950s, and dresses seem to celebrate the métiers in an almost self-conscious flamboyance.





Hubert de Givenchy

Day dress, ca. 1967 (left)
Oatmeal wool tweed double knit
Gift of Diana Vreeland, 1979
(1979.435.9a,b)

Day dress, 1963–67 (right)
Oatmeal wool tweed double knit
Gift of Diana Vreeland, 1979
(1979.435.10a,b)

The relaxed attitudes of the 1960s could be achieved in couture day wear. Hubert de Givenchy excelled in a style associated with such nonchalant style paladins as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Audrey Hepburn. Learning from his mentor, Balenciaga, Givenchy offered a seemingly unstructured two-piece dress indebted to the Balenciaga sack, and dubbed his "split level." For necessary articulation of details, he employed "souplesse" instead of a tailor's dart, allowing a supplementary soft fold of material to give shape to these unassuming and chic tops.





Madame (Alix) Grès

Evening gown, 1958
White silk jersey
Gift of Mrs. Leon L. Roos, 1973 (1973.104.2)

Grès, working earlier as Alix, created dresses in shafts of fabrics, the divers fluting of which served as a body entasis like the architectural model of a classical column. Seaming together fabric vertically to be continuous from hem to neckline, Grès pleated and tucked the materials into a shaping suitable to the body: the same fabric is buoyant and fluid when release-pleated from the waist down; Grès simulated a waist seam by tight tucking that continues through the bodice; and she crowned the dress with volutes and twists that extend the same fabric that is so liquid and ample at the bottom. This tour de force of material rendered in diverse ways accounts for the tempered ergonomics of such dresses. Their wearers have testified that they felt secure and not immodest in these dresses, so organic was their creation. In this dress, only one piece of fabric was added to the column: as seen in the detail, a small triangle was inserted under the arm to complete the structure, but otherwise the entire dress is conceived as one cylinder.



Cristobal Balenciaga

Evening ensemble, ca. 1962
Moss green Indian sari silk with woven gold trim
Gift of Mrs. Ephraim London, 1994 (1994.573a,b)

A loyal client provided Balenciaga with an Indian sari and asked the designer to create a dress. Balenciaga rendered couture technique to the flat textile, cutting apart the woven edging and appliquéing it to form a border for the whole of the garment. In this way, he respected the Indian source but addressed the textile as if it were a couture fabric.

India, and in particular the tradition of the sari, had long captivated the West. Bias draping of the 1920s and 1930s was influenced by the sari. That Balenciaga pursued the idea in the 1960s is late evidence of this long tradition.



CHANEL
BY KARL LAGERFELD

Evening gown and cape,
spring/summer 1995
Red silk chiffon
Courtesy Chanel

In a hand-stitched shirring worthy of Vionnet or Grès, needle and thread are passed through to create fine gathers for both a cape and a gown. Structure is discovered in technical prowess. No further decoration is necessary beyond that inherent in the process of making the dress. In this, Lagerfeld demonstrates one of his special preoccupations of allowing the couture process to become the form of the garment, an idea akin to contemporary art.







Gabrielle Chanel

Day ensemble, ca. 1927
Pink and black floral-printed silk chiffon and beige wool tweed
Isabel Shults Fund, 1984
(1984.31a–c)

Chanel excelled in soft tailoring. This particular coat-and-dress ensemble blends dressmaker techniques with the definite finishes of the tailor. The fabric is reinforced with ornamental overstitching in a manner which, seeming decoration, is structural trussing. In fact, this soft tailoring became the token of the Chanel suit in the designer's sustained evolution until her death in 1971.





Pierre Cardin

Day suit, ca. 1960 (left)
Gold wool tweed
Gift of Kay Kerr Uebel, 1994 (1994.164.2a,b)

This suit demonstrates Cardin's penchant for creating dramatic form from cloth. He extended the conventions of strict tailoring to incorporate a soft peplum with a controlled gathering that reveals his understanding of the balance and grain of fabric. His predisposition to an architectonic approach is evident in his shoulder and sleeve treatment. Cardin's innovation in the 1950s was his ability to think in terms both of fashion subtlety and semaphore, seeking the graphic emblem without vitiating the qualities of tailoring.

Pierre Cardin

Day coat, fall 1966 (facing page)
Plum wool
Gift of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1968 (CI 68.78.5)

One of the first designers to embrace a futuristic geometry, Cardin referenced fashion to contemporary dress and to an ideal of clothing for the future. He offered a streamlined future that was, in the post-Sputnik epoch, inflected by science fiction and a quixotic dream of Space-Age technology and amelioration. The diamond-shaped gusset at the waist reflects a treatment of cloth that began with Vionnet.



Cristobal Balenciaga

Day coat, 1961
Pale gray-green brushed wool
Gift of Estate of Ann E. Woodward, 1987 (1987.349.4a,b)

Of all twentieth-century designers, said Chanel, the only one who could create a garment from beginning to end was Balenciaga. His comprehensive mastery is indicated in understanding of fabric and in his awareness that a wide wedge-shaped coat could become in final appearance a cinched silhouette, playing with grain and incorporating ease.



Lanvin
by Claude Montana

Suit, spring/summer 1990
Turquoise blue wool, black wool gabardine
Courtesy Josie Natori

Montana, a ready-to-wear designer recruited to the couture by Lanvin, is noted for his aggressive imposition of edifice-like forms on the body. He seems to create a Le Corbusier structure in dress. When Montana worked with a couture atelier, he emphasized his interest in tailoring, but with seemingly simple effects that could only be accomplished by the most skilled hands.





TECHNIQUE

The work of Diderot to delineate the *métiers* in the service of dress anticipates their continuing role in the emerging couture houses of the mid-nineteenth century. Outside the *maisons de couture*, governed by the designers, stand the many ateliers of specialized fashion trades that constitute essential elements of the couture. We have chosen to indicate only the *métiers* that are applied directly onto the garment. The fully accessorized and complemented wearing of the couture depends, of course, upon a large corps of ancillary makers: glovers, costume jewelers, enamel and nacre workers, milliners, hairdressers, shoemakers, and furriers. As master embroiderer François Lesage pointed out, "the humble 'tradesmen's entrance' opens straight onto the red carpet leading to the heights of haute couture." These are not trades and *métiers* as mere competencies of toil. They are, as Diderot catalogued and reasoned for an uncertain heritage, the enabling arts and veritable gifts of the couture.

Workshop masteries distinguish the couture from other visual arts. Embroidery that can make a fictive display of jewelry on a dress or re-create a painting onto clothing, and featherwork that improves upon nature in articulating the shape of each feather provide the couture with an absolute control founded in ancient crafts. The long dynamic of the relationship between the couture specialists and the couture designers has been that the designers often set tasks that might seem to challenge the possibilities of the *métier* medium, but that yield a tour de force accomplishment. In fact, a sample from the lace maker or embroiderer may often be the source of inspiration to the designer. One cannot imagine Schiaparelli independent of Lesage embroidery or Lanvin without the tradition of Lemarié featherwork.

When Lucien Lelong, president of the Chambre Syndicale during the War, was challenged by the Nazi authorities to transport the couture to Berlin in the 1940s, he responded that such a move was impossible because of the synergy between the couturiers and the *petites mains* workshops. To have taken the couture to Berlin would have meant moving hundreds of ateliers, and so the führer's plan was thwarted.

Detail of Poiret coat (see page 76)

Paris has remained the epicenter of the couture since the time of Worth, not because of an obdurate nationalism but because of an abiding tradition of creative resources, human and physical. Designers from elsewhere in the world have entered the couture as a practice and profession, respecting Paris as its heart. Even as the couture changes in sensibilities from flamboyance to elegant restraint, as in our time, or from using the familiar materials to new technical experiments, the practice of luxury remains sustained by the hand skills that speak, in themselves, of mastery, subtlety, and etiquette.

What distinguishes the couture garment from a ready-to-wear piece is the handwork, functioning not as luxe augmentation, but as a capability intrinsic to the garment. Thus, the embroidery, lace, and feathers of the following pages are not after-the-fact decorations that finish the garments but their enabling principles, the elements of creation that are the matrix of the design process. Even though practiced outside the *maisons de couture,* the work of Diderot's old *métiers* is inherent in the designs of the haute couture.





Jean-Philippe Worth

Ball gown, 1900–1905
Ice blue silk satin embroidered in scrolling floral motif
Gift of Mrs. Walter H. Page, 1979 (1979.251.4a,b)

Jean-Philippe Worth succeeded his father as designer for the House of Worth, creating to great favor the stiffened, slightly archaic, rococo revival of the turn of the century. The house continued its virtuoso technical achievements, as represented in this example, in which metallic thread is couched to render baskets and scrolling ribbons, and ivory marquisette is cut into circles and pulled in at the perimeter to make the soft three-dimensional petals that are then applied to the fabric. As the twentieth century began, these designs recalled the eighteenth century, but even more importantly their crafts and artisanal opulence implied the conservative impulse of the couture opposed to the novelties of a new era.



Paul Poiret

Coat, ca. 1919
Black silk and wool blend with white leather appliqués and white fur trim
Gift of Mrs. David J. Colton, 1961
(CI 61.40.4)

In the 1910s, Poiret introduced an avant-garde sensibility into the couture. His penchant for the opulent gesture, lusher fabrics, fur, and feathers was part of his grandiose *Gesamtkunstwerk*, inspired by stage and Orientalist extravaganza. He was also capable of more subdued garments. In the case of this day coat with leather appliqués, the leather is cut into a delicate filigree and couched by hand onto the wool to create a graphic lattice of white over black (see detail on page 72). The cylindrical silhouette and standing collar suggest inspiration from Chinese or Near Eastern robes and coats.

Jeanne Lanvin

Dinner dress, ca. 1924
Ivory hammered silk satin with black silk satin appliqués
Gift of Mrs. Carter Marshall Braxton, 1980
(1980.92.1a–c)



Seeking in both the new cylindrical silhouettes and in her characteristic robes de style to adorn flat planes with the new designs associated with Art Deco, Lanvin developed a repertoire of motifs at once modern and decorative. Black cutouts are stitched by hand to a contrasting white dress. The design is even further integrated into the dress by the stitching's being hidden under the edge of the appliqué, thus making it appear a pieced rather than an applied patterning.





Jeanne Lanvin

Robe de style, summer 1924
Black silk taffeta with green silk and sequin embroidered medallions and silver corded net
Gift of Mrs. Albert Spalding, 1962 (CI 62.58.1)

Chinoiserie roundels that intimate the most elaborate past of the Chinese court, alternately resembling embroidered Manchu court badge motifs or the glinting scales of Mongol armor interpreted in Western embroidery, animate a robe de style by Lanvin. Dabbling with the ambience of historicisms, heavy with paillettes and beads, Lanvin also introduces a play with gravity, mingling the apparently heavy and weightless. A folded layer of ivory silk tulle that has been corded with silver metallic thread suggests the rainbow hem of a Manchu robe.





Jean Patou

Evening dress, ca. 1927
Off-white silk charmeuse embroidered with colored beads and gold sequins
Gift of Mrs. John A. van Beuren and Mrs. Samuel M. V. Hamilton, 1977 (1977.210.16)

While Chanel has become the remembered name, in the 1920s Jean Patou was as important as Gabrielle Chanel in introducing ideas of the new woman sponsored by sports vigor and design simplicity. His dresses were designed with a post–World War I ideal in mind: woman enfranchised and empowered. In particular, Patou held the New World as a model of the new woman. He imported a cohort of American women to serve as mannequins; even his evening wear had the simplicity of a tennis shift and depended on its elaborate embroidery as sole improvement on the mechanics of sportswear.

Elsa Schiaparelli

Evening ensemble, 1937 (left)
Dark green satin-backed crepe gown, dark green silk velvet jacket with gold tinsel and bead embroidery
Gift of Julia B. Henry, 1978
(1978.288.19a–c)

Evening jacket, 1938 (right)
Plum red silk crepe with sequin and bead embroidery
Gift of Mrs. J. R. Keagy, 1974
(1974.338.2)

Introducing sinister and Surrealist-inspired themes to the arts of embroidery, Schiaparelli created an art of conceptualism and concupiscence. Cicada buttons are a decoration of equivocal or complex beauty as are Schiaparelli's flowers in "amber." Known for collaborations with Salvador Dali and Jean Cocteau, Schiaparelli was also capable of creating her own idiosyncratic Surrealism independent of these artists.





Madeleine Vionnet

Evening gown, summer 1938
Pale gray-blue crepe completely embroidered with rows of fringe in scallop motif
Gift of Madame Madeleine Vionnet, 1952 (CI 52.18.4)

Though there are separate specialists for applied braid and fringe, known as the *crépinières,* Vionnet has chosen in this instance to employ an embroidery of individual graduated lengths of silk thread passed and looped through the fabric, with each thread forming two drops of fringe. The scallop arcs constitute the sole decoration of the dress.



Elsa Schiaparelli

Evening cape, 1938
Black silk velvet embroidered with gold sequins in a design inspired by the Neptune Fountain in the Parc de Versailles
Bequest of Lady Mendl, 1951
(CI 51.83)

In an instance of sui generis pertinence to one client, a velvet cape for Lady Mendl refers to her propensities for the spectacular and the eighteenth century and celebrates the Neptune Fountain and its proximity to her house in the Parc de Versailles. Schiaparelli's own interest in the eighteenth century is evident in her jacket (see frontispiece) with glass embroidered rococo hand mirrors bracketing buttons cast as Hellenic deities.



Jacques Fath

Ball gown, ca. 1952
Black silk velvet with ivory silk satin, white mink, and gold metal trim
Gift of Mrs. Giorgio Uzielli, 1984 (1984.606.3a,b)

Known for flattering dinner dresses that set off the head and shoulders with an audacious décolletage, Fath created a cantilevered outer bodice with a modest ivory satin under-bodice. The extended plane of the outer bodice is like the soaring shapes of Saarinen buildings, establishing an artifice within the canon of modernist restraint. Fath played with the contrast—of matte and shiny, of ivory and black, of white fur and gold bullion—as a rich textural perimeter for the dress.



Christian Dior

Ball gown, ca. 1952 (left)
White silk organza embroidered with allover pattern of grasses and clover
Gift of Mrs. David Kluger, 1960 (CI 60.21.1a,b)

Cocktail dress, spring 1952 (right)
White silk organza heavily embroidered with a floral motif
Gift of Mrs. Byron C. Foy, 1955 (CI 55.76.20a–d)

The designer set exacting tasks for his embroiderer, Rebé. The embroidery is set in a nuanced spacing of elements with the densest application at the waist, thinning as it falls away to the hem. This seemingly organic application, simulating a diminishment in nature, is further enhanced by Rebé's repertoire of embroidery stitches to create a dimensionality of the surface. The effect is optically then like a meadow's variegation.









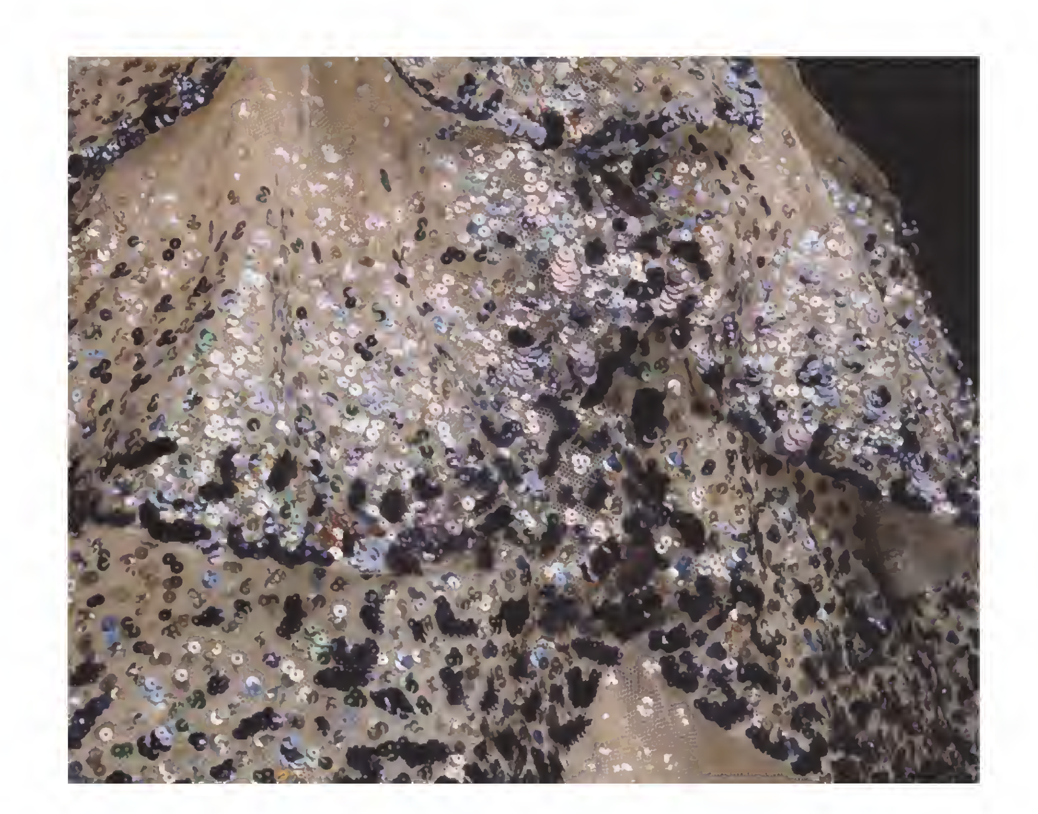


Christian Dior

"Junon" ball gown, fall 1949 (left)
Pale blue silk net embroidered with iridescent sequins
Gift of Mrs. Byron C. Foy, 1953
(CI 53.40.5a–e)

"Venus" ball gown, fall 1949 (right)
Gray silk net embroidered with feather-shaped opalescent sequins
Gift of Mrs. Byron C. Foy, 1953
(CI 53.40.7a–e)

Rebé embroidery, more than that of any other embroidery house, evinced a fine eighteenth-century sensibility compatible with Dior's profound longing for the past. Only four years after World War II, the artisanal trades had fully recovered, rendering to the couture materials and applications as rich as before. As Dior restored a grand silhouette, he also reinstated artisanal luxury. Even the most subtle molded nacreous paillettes and graduated sequins were available and were used by Dior.





Christian Dior
by Yves Saint Laurent

"L'Éléphant blanc" evening dress,
spring/summer 1958
White silk net embroidered with silver thread and rhinestones
Gift of Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1977 (1977.329.5)

Creating the trapeze silhouette for Dior, Saint Laurent has a rigid understructure veiled under a fly-away cage. A boned corset anchors the dress but allows the delusion of a free-swinging cone. Seeking a shape for independence, though still tethered, the "Éléphant Blanc" dress also employs a shimmering embroidery on net that requires a finishing flourish to the thread work on a transparent surface. Thus, in both surface decoration and in structure, Saint Laurent gained the effect of ethereal, buoyant freedom while retaining the structure of the couture. From the earliest works at the house of Dior through the designer's accomplishments in his own house, Saint Laurent has practiced and perfected this modernist wielding of couture construction and proficiency to seem wholly unfettered.





Hubert de Givenchy

Evening gown, 1963
Coral cotton lace reembroidered with coral-colored beads and coral pieces
Gift of Mrs. John Hay Whitney, 1974 (1974.184.2)

Coral with matching glass beads is applied in high relief on the armature of a minimalist Givenchy silhouette. A princess-seam dress skimming the torso, but flaring to the hem, is almost severe, but it is rendered rococo and ornate by the surface treatment. Givenchy's special trait was to find an equilibrium between excess and the reductive. An austere form supports a heavily encrusted embroidery, making a gown that works both as an extravagance and as a spartan design.



Yves Saint Laurent

"Crocodile" evening jacket, 1986
Blue sequin and seed bead embroidered silk and
royal blue silk satin
Courtesy Yves Saint Laurent

The new embroidery devised by François Lesage for Saint Laurent sets off large jewel-like sequins anchored at an angle in order to form the dimensional effects of the scaling of a crocodile against the inflection of small seed beads. The platelet sequins are hand-colored to emphasize the deepness of the relief.





Yves Saint Laurent

Evening dress, 1983
Silver and brown sequin and seed bead embroidered silk
Courtesy Yves Saint Laurent

Pushing embroidery from a decorative device of the surface to a place of structural conceit, Saint Laurent uses the embroiderer's skill to obliterate all the seaming required for a skintight fit. Referencing the naiad, or even the fish itself (sometimes known as the sardine dress), Saint Laurent had a prototype in nature, but his penchant is always for the artifice, the supreme creation that in this case is the integrity of the dress that appears indivisible, yet flexible and formfitting. Made to the client, the couture always offers a perfect fit; Saint Laurent hyperbolizes even the couture to create the dress as an iridescent skin.

Chanel by Karl Lagerfeld

Evening suit, fall/winter 1986–87
Black sequin, gold seed bead, and black chenille embroidered black silk
Courtesy Chanel

In embroidery that simulates the interior quilting of a classic Chanel jacket, Lagerfeld makes a clever allusion to Coco Chanel. In making conspicuous the Chanel chain and quilting, Lagerfeld takes the secrets of the couture for granted and flaunts his relationship to the past. The quilted surface and a binding resembling a black corded gold chain in seed beads and sequins render iconic the devices of classic Chanel and render ironic the capabilities of the new master of the legacy.





Chanel by Karl Lagerfeld

Evening gown, fall/winter 1995–96
Black silk ribbon embroidered net
Courtesy Chanel

Not only does silk ribbon create a dense meander within a field of silk net, but it is attached in a way that stands it on edge, making the net demonstrably three dimensional, as if it were a cage of continuous silk ribbon. Flattened, a ribbon encased in an embroidery screen could be relatively inert. The effect here (seen especially in detail, page 8) is both spidery and as animated in painting-sculpture dilemma as a Frank Stella wall sculpture.



Chanel by Karl Lagerfeld

Evening ensemble, spring/summer 1995
White and blue-black seed bead embroidered silk satin and black silk chiffon
Courtesy Chanel

Lagerfeld offers the deliberate paradox of a sailor's sweater from vernacular dress rendered in the luxury of couture. The designer's zeal for common clothing and popular themes, especially for the house of Chanel, where the acumen about menswear and practical clothing has always prevailed, does not vitiate his commitment to the excellence in design and technique of the couture. On the contrary, it is as if the juxtaposition of the two polar levels of fashion refines the couture's virtues and stimulates the couture's imagination.







Gabrielle Chanel

Evening gown, 1936
White Chantilly lace and silk net
Gift of Mrs. Stephen M. Kellen, 1978 (1978.165.16a,b)

Silk net has been treated in a labor-intensive manner with ruffles shirred in, set by heat, and the shirring thread removed. Designer of no-nonsense and men's-tailoring-inspired sportswear, Chanel was not oblivious to the beautiful benefits of the virtuoso hand-sewn details of the couture. If Vionnet was, in the 1920s and 1930s, the chief designer of configuration achieved through delicate but strategic hand sewing, Chanel was nonetheless aware of how much form could be achieved by the smallest stitch, even in this case with the thread subsequently removed.



Madeleine Vionnet

Evening gown, 1939
Black cotton lace with velvet appliqués over silver lamé
Gift of Mrs. Harrison Williams, 1952
(CI 52.24.2a,b)

A bias lamé underdress is visible through the veil of a lace overdress with velvet. Seeking the unity of the garment and the integrity of cloth, Vionnet found simplification even in lace, adding only a small panel at the waist to the one-piece bodice. Thus, even in the sheerest and inherently particled garment, Vionnet insisted on the largest possible element.



Yves Saint Laurent

Evening ensemble, spring 1963
Reappliquéd white silk organdy guipure
Gift of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1964 (CI 64.59.7a,b)

The patron saint of lace makers is Saint Anne, mother of Mary. Maternal and feminine, immaculate and important, the traditions of lace making have been associated for centuries with the finest in dress. Lace embellishments to court dress for both men and women were evidence of power displayed through a craft. Hand-appliquéd lace defies the machine aesthetic and convenience in as palpable a form as any. The white-on-white relief of guipure is a small allover sculpture articulating the surface of a very modest, even elementary, silhouette. Saint Laurent knows that ethereal handcraft garniture is most effective when combined with an unpretentious modern structure.



Gianni Versace

Evening dress,
fall/winter 1991–92 (left)
Pink quilted silk satin,
silk georgette, lace
Gift of Versace, 1993 (1993.53.1)

Evening dress,
fall/winter 1991–92 (right)
Pale blue quilted silk satin,
silk georgette, lace
Gift of Versace, 1993 (1993.53.2)

Setting the most complex and concentrated tasks for the expertise of the couture ateliers, Versace brings satin in trapunto into immediate conjunction with pleated lace. Lace is customarily a flat panel; Versace delights in applying a second unexpected effect upon one technical privilege of the couture. Always inclined, even in his ready-to-wear, to challenge the possibilities of the medium, Versace's couture work summons its own tests of technique.





Louiseboulanger
Evening dress, 1928
Gray-beige silk satin with ostrich-feather trim
Gift of Mrs. Wolcott Blair, 1973 (1973.6)

Feathers of the 1920s swayed with the new music and dance, benefited from Orientalism's panache and bent for the exotic, and allowed clothing to be more fluid and flexible than ever. Here, the feather trim is individual filaments of ostrich plume knotted together to form longer strands. Each segment is dyed a different tone for the effect of an ombré cascade. The feather in nature is a beautiful form, but Louiseboulanger's feathers are purposely governed and distilled beyond natural beauty to achieve a trim synthetic and sophisticated.

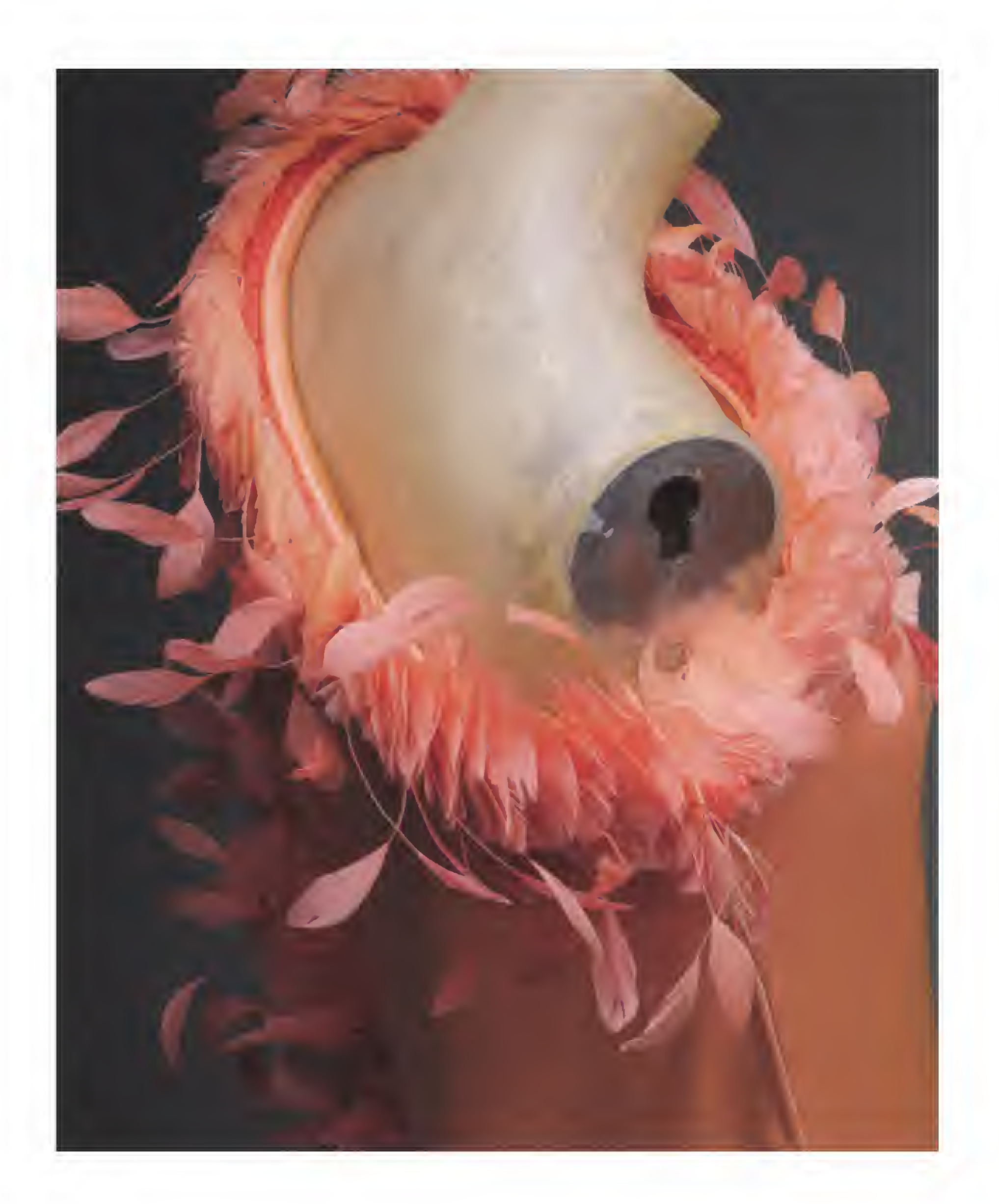




Hubert de Givenchy

Evening gown, ca. 1968
Salmon-colored silk with feathers
Gift of Mrs. Claus von Bülow, 1971
(1971.79.4)

The feathers of this dress are stripped down to the tip to create an artificial profile. Indicative of the couture in seeking an improvement even on nature, these contrived feathers elaborate on the feather's natural shaping to create a self-conscious artifice. The shorter feathers have been anchored into a scallop pattern that overlaps to imitate a scale or coat in nature, but there is no element left to chance or to nature's carelessness. The longer plumes are affixed at the stem to be tremblant and animated on the dress.





Hubert de Givenchy

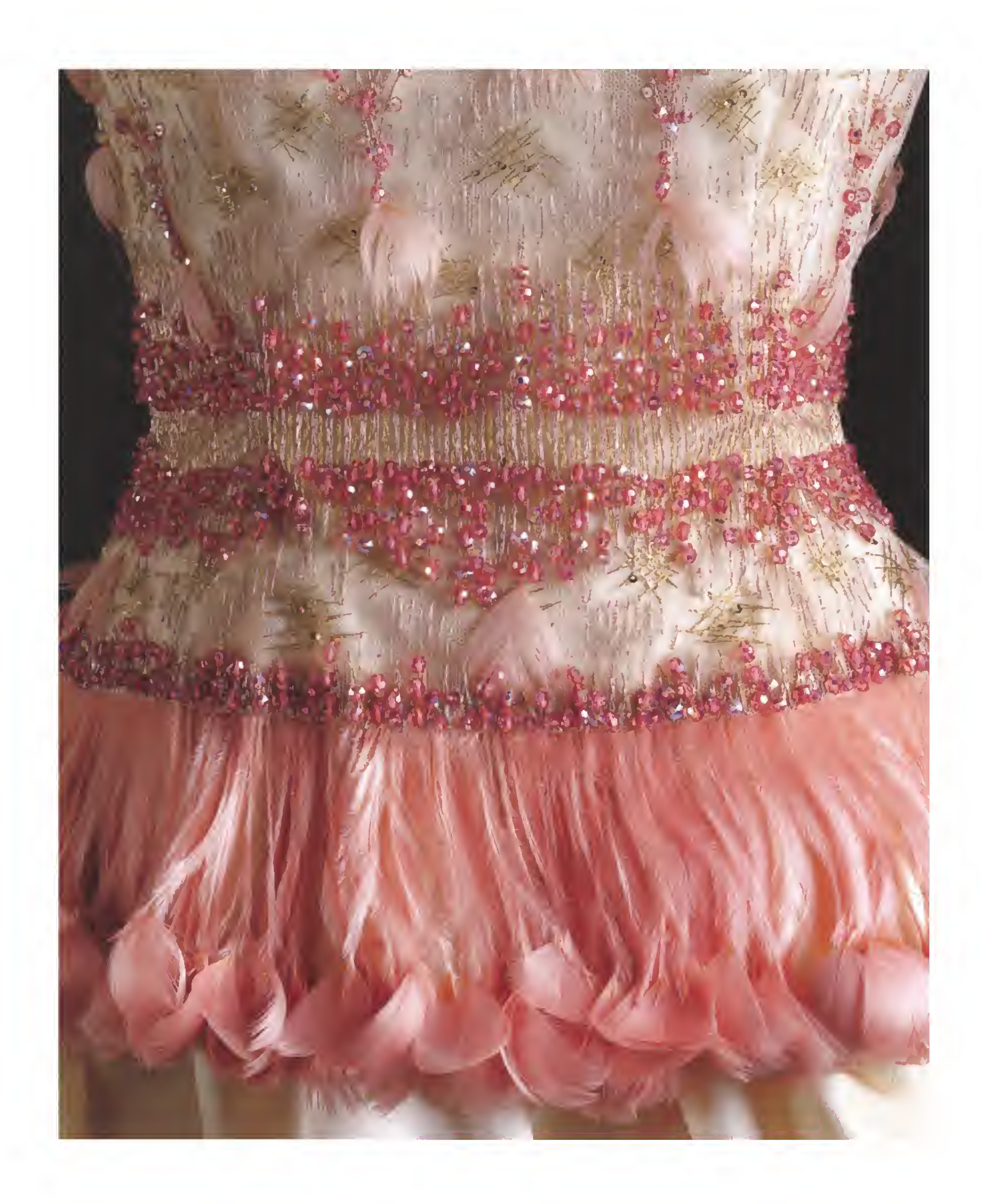
Evening dress, ca. 1966 (left)
Dark brown silk broadcloth with ostrich feathers
Gift of Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1977 (1977.108.3a–c)

Cristobal Balenciaga

Evening gown, fall 1965 (right)
Pink dotted silk tulle with ostrich feathers
Gift of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1966 (CI 66.54.5)

Shaved ostrich feathers, their filaments stripped and dyed, are individually applied to the silk, anchored upward and against the grain in order to form an animated field in soft colors. Like the optical effect of an Impressionist painting, the dress is seen distinctly at a distance, but as a complex accretion at close range.





Hubert de Givenchy

Evening dress, early 1960s
White silk satin and pink net
embroidered with pink crystals
and feathers
Gift of Mrs. John Hay Whitney,
1974 (1974.184.1a–c)

Combining elaborately couched silver and crystal embroidery with a fringe of ostrich filaments and individually glued feathers, Givenchy created a tiered register of luxurious forms. The proximity of exceptional textures enriches the waist of the gown. In the lushness of the overblouse and its pendant feathers, Givenchy created an uncertain placement of the waist, even while directing our attention to this zone.

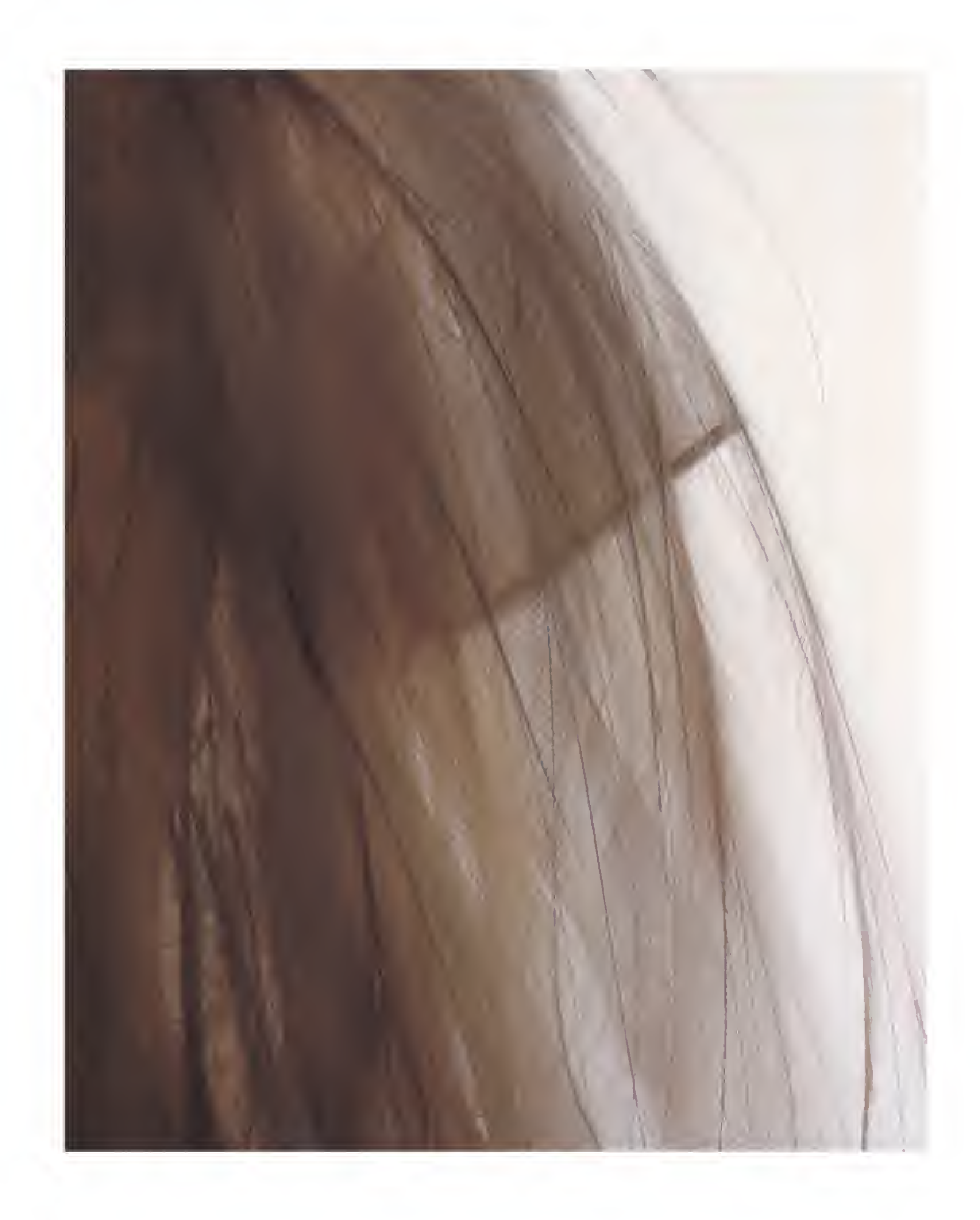




Yves Saint Laurent

Evening dress, 1969–70
Bird of paradise feathers over beige silk organza
Gift of Baron Philippe de Rothschild, 1983 (1983.619.1a,b)

Saint Laurent showed respect for the natural beauty of the feathers but created a new beauty as each has been hand stitched to a nude organza base. The dress then is the gossamer creation both airy and aery, a rara avis of creativity.





Christian Dior by Gianfranco Ferré

Evening coat, 1991
Black and white Mongolian goat and ostrich feathers
Courtesy Iris Barrel Apfel, Attata Foundation

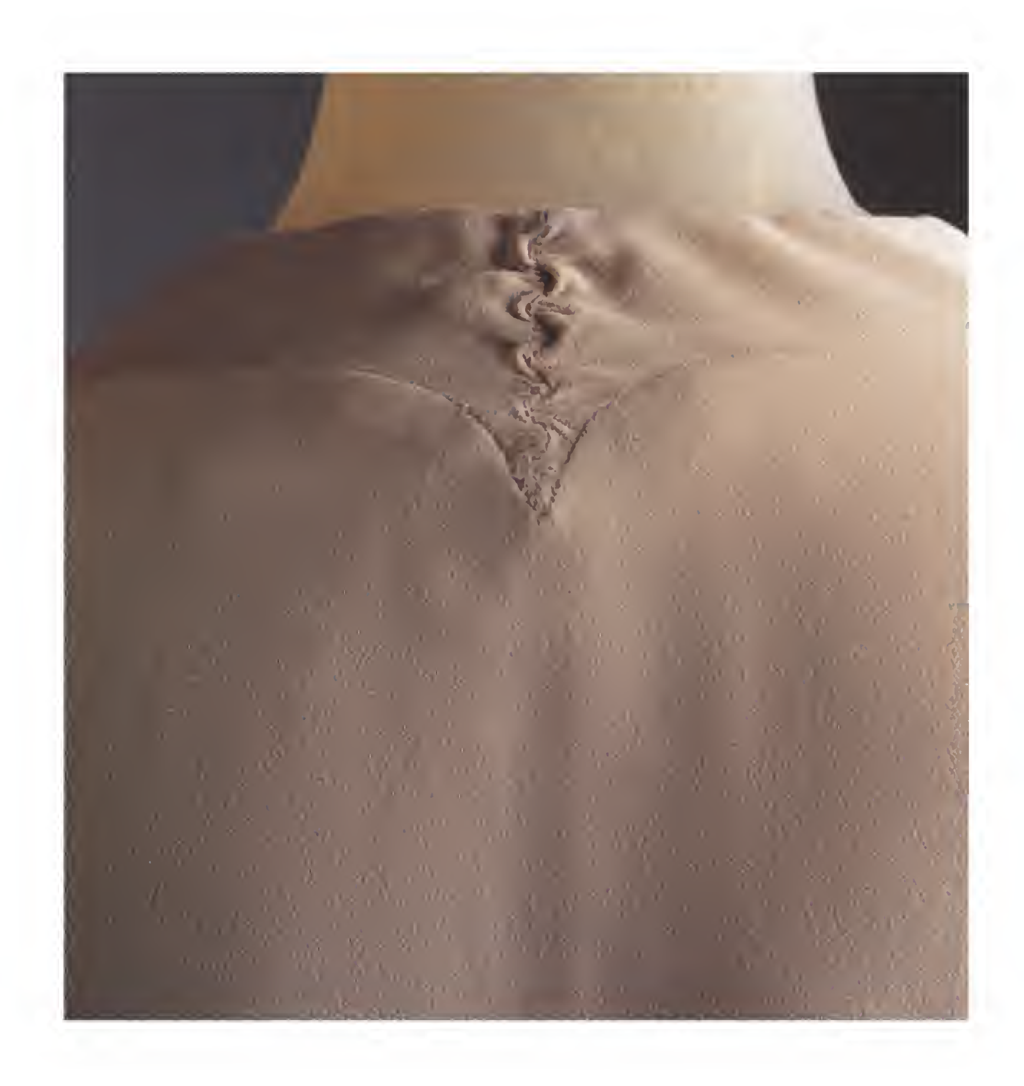
Mongolian goat is augmented by curled and uncurled black-and-white ostrich feathers. The first impression is of a mottled uniformity, but the eye becomes attracted to the greater painterly complexity of organic materials rendered into artifice.

Chanel
by Karl Lagerfeld

Evening dress, fall/winter 1995–96
Black silk chiffon, Lycra spandex,
stripped black feathers
Courtesy Chanel

In this example, each feather is split in half down the central quill and twisted to form spidery ellipses, incommensurate with any in nature's aviary, more kinetic than the feather in the wild. What Lagerfeld discovers in the feather is the essence of the feather's coil, coat, kinesis, but each in its Platonic pith. Nature is surpassed in these enhanced feathers, deliberately overstated, especially in the context of the other filmy and stretchy textures of the dress.





Detail of Mainbocher wedding dress for the Duchess of Windsor (see page 57)

INDEX OF DESIGNERS